

**THE MODIFIED STATUS OF  
*STRYMONIDIA W-ALBUM* (KNOCH) (LEPIDOPTERA:  
LYCAENIDAE) IN NORTH WEST SURREY**

PETER BAKER

*Mount Vale, The Drive, Virginia Water, Surrey GU25 4BP.*

Historically, *Strymonidia w-album* (Knoch), the white letter hairstreak, has been regarded as a rare insect in north west Surrey. Bretherton's (1955) comprehensive list for the area cites but one record in 1864. This author advised two further sightings, in 1970 and 1972 (Baker, 1986). Thereafter, spread of Dutch elm disease, which killed all known wych elm *Ulmus glabra* Hudson in the area, made further records even more unlikely.

This situation changed in 1992 when, over the period 27.vi to 4.viii, four sightings of this hairstreak were made in my garden in the Thorpe/Virginia Water area. The condition of the insects seen indicated that at least three specimens were involved.

This year, 1993, a check of roadsides and hedgerows was made from late April to early June. One 200 m length of a somewhat remote lane which contained a single fruiting example of *U. glabra* in the mid 1980s (which had disappeared by 1989), produced six straggly examples in 1993, and two other more substantial trees were found in hedgerows, isolated from these by about 3 km. Three larvae of *S. w-album* were found on the six adjacent trees and none on the isolated specimens.

It has been reported previously that, when the M25/M3 motorway system was built and nearby roads realigned, large scale amenity planting of exotic tree species took place along the newly created banks and verges. One such bank was found some 1 km from my house and about 3 km from the site mentioned above. Over about 200 m, 50–60 examples of an exotic 'wych elm' are included in a dense planting of several other species along both sides of the roadway. These *Ulmus* specimens are 5 to 10 m tall and they fruited freely in 1993. This *Ulmus* has reddish winged fruits scattered along the branches in bunches of up to about six—compared with *U. glabra* which has large aggregations of pale green fruits generally towards the ends of branches. These trees produced larvae of *S. w-album* in quantity. A systematic check of three neighbouring trees, covering all that could be reached from ground level up to 2.5 m along one side produced 14 larvae, suggesting that a very substantial colony is present.

All larvae fed up quickly, showing a marked preference for leaves rather than fruits, and over 50 butterflies were ultimately returned to the wild.

One, rare, sunny afternoon in late June showed the white letter hairstreak to be flying in some numbers around the trees and feeding freely from roadside thistles and early *Buddleia*. In previous years I have regularly walked this road without seeing this butterfly.

This dramatic upsurge in the population of what has been regarded as a scarce—or overlooked—insect prompts several questions.

Past experience with the rearing of wild caught *S. w-album* larvae from other parts of Surrey has shown their marked preference for the fruits and they would only consume the leaves of their foodplant when no alternative was available. The non-preferred diet would result in slightly undersized specimens unless the larvae were taken a short time before pupation. The noted preference for leaves over fruit on the part of the present population may be the result of selective pressures which have allowed a relict population to survive over a period when mature,

fruiting wych elm was rare or exterminated in their habitat. Small suckers of *U. glabra* and other elms did survive Dutch elm disease and could have provided the conditions necessary to tide the species over until more favourable conditions ensued.

Or was the present population imported with the trees which were planted in the late 1970s, there to survive at low levels until conditions became favourable for the current population explosion? Two adult specimens retained show no obvious difference to other Surrey examples, but detailed examination by a butterfly expert might detect differences which suggest an origin from elsewhere in the UK or perhaps overseas.

The advantage that *S. w-album* has received from motorway construction may be quoted by the proponents of such works to show that such excrescences can be beneficial to wildlife. Whatever the utility of our road system this event must surely be viewed in the same 'positive' light as the fact that *Thalera fimbrialis* (Scop.) has seemed to benefit from the protection afforded by the fence which surrounds the Nuclear Electric complex at Dungeness.

#### REFERENCES

- Baker, P. J. 1986. Changes in the status of the Lepidoptera of a north west Surrey locality. *Proc. Trans. Br. Ent. Nat. Hist. Soc.* **19**: 33-42.  
 Bretherton, R. F. 1955. A list of the Macrolepidoptera and Pyralidina of north west Surrey. *Proc. S. Lond. Ent. Nat. Hist. Soc.* **1955**: 94-151.

---

### SHORT COMMUNICATION

***Ctenophora flaveolata* (F.) (Diptera: Tipulidae) from The Warburg Reserve, Oxon.**—Whilst on an evening visit on 13.iv.1993 to The Warburg Reserve SSSI (formerly known as Bix Bottom), Oxon (grid reference SU7187) I took a male of this impressive species from a beech trunk. The specimen was reluctantly taken, since its rarity was predicted, but fading light meant that photography was not possible. The species is currently given Red Data Book 2 status in Falk (1991), and is associated with ancient beech woodlands in Southern England. This specimen was taken in an area of the reserve dominated by mature beech. A map of its national distribution and brief notes on its ecology and status were recently published by Stubbs (1992) and a recent record was also given by Alexander (1991). Despite its rarity, the species has been recorded on three other occasions in Oxon (J. Campbell, pers. comm.). The record is particularly interesting because of the very early date; the species is normally recorded in May.

My thanks to BBONT for permission to collect insects on their reserves, Miss Tina Teearu for organizing the visit and John Campbell, Oxfordshire Museums Service, for checking the records in his care.—A. Godfrey, Ecosurveys Ltd, Priory Lodge, Hagnaby, Spilsby, Lincolnshire PE23 4BP.

#### REFERENCES

- Alexander, A. A. 1991. *Ctenophora flaveolata* (F.). (Diptera: Tipulidae) new to Gloucestershire. *Br. J. Ent. Nat. Hist.* **4**: 64.  
 Falk, S. J. 1991. *A review of the scarce and threatened flies of Great Britain, Part 1*. Nature Conservancy Council.  
 Stubbs, A. E. 1992. *Provisional atlas of the long-palped craneflies (Diptera, Tipulinae) of Britain and Ireland*. Biological Records Centre, Institute of Terrestrial Ecology, Monks Wood, Huntingdon.